# FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
# November 11, 2001

# TAKE IT TO THE LORD IN PRAYER
# John M. Buchanan

There is such a thing as being cursed with getting what we have determined to have at all costs. It would not be a merciful God who grants everything we foolishly set our hearts on....

We know that God always wants what is for our true good, but we cannot deceive ourselves about what our true good really is, and hence when we ask for temporal benefits we should commit our prayer to God's wisdom, just as a child commits his request to the superior wisdom of his parents. Such prayer, then, should be made in complete submission and abandonment to God's ever-wise decision, accepting those decisions in advance even if they are or seem to be contrary to what we have asked for.

Jean Daujat
*Prayer*

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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SCRIPTURE
LUKE 18:1-8

*Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our minds and hearts to your word, that hearing we may believe, and believing, trust you with our lives. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

"There are no atheists in foxholes," it is often said and now, someone added last week, "since September 11th, the whole world is a foxhole." "In God We Trust. United We Stand" is emblazoned on billboards along the Dan Ryan Expressway and on colorful posters in Water Tower Place amidst newly emerging Christmas decorations. Public religion, public discussion of religion and a lot of praying is happening all over the place. "There are no atheists in foxholes and now the whole world is a foxhole."

Theologian, Carol Zaleski, recently wrote a helpful essay on prayer in these particular times. She feels these days not like a theologian preparing scholarly opinions, but like a mother huddled in a cave with her children and finds herself turning to traditional prayers for protection – for her family, her community, the men and women of the armed forces, her nation, and herself. "360-degree prayers," she calls them, prayers which "speak to a legitimate need to encircle ourselves in a mantle of grace." Actually praying for protection from all harm is a very old tradition.

Our Celtic ancestors wrote and prayed a distinctive form of 360-degree prayers called "Breastplate Prayers" from Ephesians 6, which talk about putting on the whole armor of God, the breastplate of righteousness. St. Patrick's Breastplate is familiar.

> "Christ to shield me today…
> Christ with me, Christ before me,
> Christ behind me….
> Christ when I lie down, Christ when
> I sit down, Christ when I arise…"

Zaleski quotes a Muslim 360-degree prayer:

> "O God appoint for me light in my heart and light in my tomb and light before me and light behind me, light on my left and right, above and below."

Zaleski concludes:

> "May God grant us all a breastplate of light. Never has there been greater need for it." [The Christian Century, Oct. 24-31, 2001, p.28]

There is a lot of praying going on: In the world of books there is something of a phenomenon happening at the moment. The Prayer of Jabez, a little book by evangelist Bruce Wilkinson, has been on the New York Times bestseller list for 35 weeks.

And yet, most people I find, even those who pray regularly, have serious theological questions about prayer. Does it work? Does it change anything? Is it right to pray for things: for health and healing, for safety and prosperity?

In his wonderful memoir about his first parish in New Cana, Illinois, *Open Secrets*, Lutheran Richard Lischer describes the way the issue presents itself to all of us sooner or later. Amy Friedens, an eighth grader in his confirmation class, was confined to a wheel chair, a victim of cerebral palsy. Members of the congregation "patterned" Amy when she was a baby, stretching and manipulating her limbs, but the doctors had discontinued the procedure and Amy spent her days in her wheel chair. And then Kathryn Kuhlman, the evangelist and faith healer, was coming to St. Louis. Amy came to Lischer, her pastor, to talk about it. Kuhlman's healing services featured piles of discarded crutches, canes, braces and wheel chairs. It was clear that Amy was "going for the cure." And Lischer debated what to say. Should he express his doubts? Should he puncture her childish trust? He recalls:

> "The first time I prayed for a miracle I had been Amy's age. The doctors had all but diagnosed my Dad with cancer, subject to a biopsy report that would take a week. All night long I said my prayers every night while I listened to the St. Louis Cardinals games before drifting off to sleep. When the biopsy came in it was negative. The next time I prayed for a miracle was for my baby son. Please don't let it be hyaline membrane disease. Let it be pneumonia. On each occasion I had presented God with a manageable range of options, but this was different." (p. 159)

Who hasn't prayed prayers like that before? And who hasn't wondered about it? Does God intercede at our urging? Does God need to be reminded or prodded into action to heal and protect. "Does God stick a finger in, if only now and then? Or is praying for things and events, for rain and healing — delusional?" is the way Annie Dillard bluntly asks it. [For the Time Being, p.168]

Last August David Edwards, an ex-criminal, recently laid off from his fiber-optics job, shared with three other people the Powerball jackpot, $295 million dollars, third largest in history. Edwards bought $8 dollars worth of tickets at a convenience store 90 minutes before the drawing and offered up a prayer. I said, "Help me Lord. I know it might not be right of me to ask you this, but could you just let me win this." [The Chicago Tribune, 8/28/01]

I'm not sure I would have prayed that prayer — at least not so anyone could hear me, but I know if I won a $295 million dollar jackpot I most certainly would break into the Doxology — "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" or at the very least, say "Thank you, Jesus!"

The Prayer of Jabez is a major bestseller. Bruce Wilkinson lifted the prayer out of an obscure Old Testament passage: the 4th chapter of First Chronicles where, in the midst of a long list of names, without comment, it comes to Jabez, and then it says:

> Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!" And God granted what he asked.

Wilkinson makes some astonishing and very confident claims based on that obscure passage.

- God really does have unclaimed blessing for you – with a handful of core commitments you can procede with confidence and expectation that your heavenly father will bring it to pass. [p.19]
- He says God wants you to be selfish in your prayers. To ask for more and more. [p.19]
- God's bounty is limited only by us. [p.29]
- Wilkinson says if Jabez worked on Wall Street, he might have prayed, "Lord, increase the value of my investment portfolio." [p.31]
- When a Christian executives ask me, "Is it right to ask God for more business?" My response is absolutely!
- You will know beyond doubt that God has opened heaven's storehouses because you prayed. [p.84]

The secular press has had a field day with the book. The Wall Street Journal says it "amplifies what is arguably the least Christian aspect of contemporary American culture — using God as a means to worldly satisfaction." The New York Times said there is some "snake oil selling here."

I have problems with the book's extreme confidence that God's blessings always follow our requests and its consistent neglect of the reality of human tragedy and suffering. In the author's defense, he does say repeatedly that what Jabez really prayed for and got was more responsibility, more opportunity to do good things for God. He does say that our prayers should always focus on "our wanting for ourselves nothing more or less than what God wants for us." [p.29] I'm just not certain that readers will be able to even hear that because of the appeal of "heaven's storehouses" opening for us. That sounds to me, frankly, a lot more like a Powerball jackpot than more work to do.

Huston Smith in *Why, Religion Matters* says, "When the consequences of belief are worldly goods, such as health, fixing on these turns religion into a service station for self-gratification and churches into health clubs. This is the opposite of authentic religion's role, which is to de-center the ego, not pander to its worldly desires." (p.45)

Jesus told a parable once about persistent prayer — about his disciples "need to pray always and not to lose heart." It was about an aloof, harsh judge and a poor widow who kept coming to him for justice in a lawsuit she had filed. He ignored her, but she persisted. She bothered him, nagged, badgered and finally he gave in and rendered a favorable judgment. "Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?"

Jesus believes that God will answer prayers for justice. It is not a carte blanche promise that prayer will produce results whatever it is we ask. On another occasion Jesus told a story about a man who finally gives his neighbor 3 loaves of bread at midnight because of the neighbor's persistent asking. "Ask and it will be given you," he said. And then to clarify, "If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

I had good parents. They didn't give me everything I wanted. I wanted a horse once, a dog, a two wheel bike before I was big enough to ride it, one year I was determined that I had to have a set of drums the Sears Christmas catalogue featured. My requests were heard and turned down. I received, in retrospect, not what I wanted, but what I needed. That's what Jesus said about prayer. And that's what you can trust. In God's good providence and God's good time — you and I, I believe, get what we need. The best hymn line of all and one I have come to deeply love over the years — "Hast thou not seen, how thy desires have been granted in what he ordaineth."

Jesus prayed honest prayers: on the night of his arrest, pleading to God to be delivered from the net of intrigue closing around him, and from the cross, that heart-breaking prayer of desperate anguish, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Does prayer change things? Jesus was not delivered from his trial and suffering and death. None of us knows enough about the mysterious ways of God either to claim absolutely that God delivered on a particular request, nor do we know enough, it seems to me, to discount or challenge others who believe their prayers have been specifically answered. I do not believe Almighty God arranges parking places or a profitable and quick real estate sale. I do know that when unforeseen and unexpected good happens — it is God we thank.

And, in a very real sense, I believe that prayer changes things. I love the way David Willis put its, "God doesn't change things," he wrote, "God changes people, who change things." [Daring Prayer p. 120] The great theologian Paul Tillick wrote, "To entreat and to intercede is to transform situations powerfully." [Dillard, op. cit. p. 169]

I believe that our prayers become channels through which God's creative love works. And I know that things become different for me when someone prays for me.

Lischer remembers:

> "The next time I saw Amy she was still in her wheelchair, as cheerful as ever. I had worried that going for the cure would leave her disillusioned and bitter, as if a child with cerebral palsy is brimming with illusions in the first place. But then you never go broke risking everything on God. The act of trusting is itself a replenishing activity, like loving, or farming or writing. Trusting makes for greater trust, not disillusionment or timidity. Amy taught me that. Or I should say, I learned that from watching Amy smile.
>
> I noticed a change in Amy. She seemed more prepared to think about her future in a wheelchair and to get on with it. She became more vocal about her condition and more assertive. She told us her Dad shouldn't have to carry her up the steps...she petitioned

the Trustees for a ramp. She announced plans to become a counselor and by the time she was in her first year of high school had already found a college with a program she wanted."

The invitation to pray, to bring to God the contents of our hearts is the natural expression of the most radical notion: namely that God knows us by name and cares about us and loves us and has come among us in Jesus Christ. The promise is not that we will get what we want when we pray, but that in the asking, the honest expression of our deepest desires and needs and longs and hopes, God transforms our desires and somehow gives us, not what we want, but what we need.

We never outgrow our need to talk things over with our parents or whoever filled that role in our lives. I haven't. I find myself wondering what Dad would think about this or that, what Mother would say about it, what they would make of what's happening in the world. It's because we have experienced the transforming reality of bringing it to someone, whatever it is; our childhood desire for a bike, our adolescent anguish over rejection by our peers, our young adult anxiety about making the best choices, our joy over our own children, our disappointments, our struggles, our own aging, our fear of death.

Jesus invites us to pray, not long formal prayers but simply the contents of our hearts.

- O God, thank you for that sunrise this morning....
  - For the beauty of that music
  - For the tastes and smells of autumn
- O God, I'm afraid...
- Christ, it hurts...
- Lord, be with me...
- Bless her and keep her, dear God...

We know how speaking any or all of that, sharing the content of our hearts, clarifies it and transforms it and transform us... And that, finally, is what prayer is — a personal response to Jesus, Jesus' invitation, and a claiming of the promise that God hears and answers our prayers.

Or, as the old gospel hymn we sang as children promises:

> Can we find a friend so faithful,
> who will all our sorrows share?
> Jesus knows our every weakness:
> Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Amen

Prayers of the People, November 11, 2001
Thomas Rook

Almighty God, we give you thanks that you are not distant but that you invite us freely to come to you, to express honestly our thoughts, our emotions. And so in these moments we do come, individually and together, voicing our gratitude and our concerns.

We thank you, creator God, for life-- our life, each person here. And we thank you for all living things that fill the earth and waters and skies with such abundant variety and surprising beauty. And for the earth -- we thank you for earth's seasons, for good crops and ample harvests.

Thank you, O Lord, for our life together, for hope and hardships shared. Thank you that, even within unsought times of distress, you bless us as you call forth qualities of courage and faith, of hope and perseverance.

Thank you for the work you give us to do in life and the strength to work, for colleagues in work and play, for daily exchanges of good humor and mutual encouragement.

Thank you for all loving relationships -- for family and for parents and teachers faithful in their care of children. We are thankful for the children, Lord, who embody our hopes for the future. Help us to be generous in providing for nurture of their bodies and minds and spirits. Thank you for young adults, for their high hopes, their search for freedom and independence. And thank you for later seasons of life, for wisdom deepened by experience, for time made precious by its passing. And within all life's seasons, loving God, thank you for your help in the difficult times of doubt and sorrow, for preserving us in temptation and danger.

And on Veterans Day, we thank you, O God, for our country and for all those who have defended it through the years. We pray your special watch over young men and women, the pride of our nation, who even today are placed in harm's way in distant lands. Give stoutness to their hearts, steadfastness in their faith. And those of generations past who fought for their country and those who gave their lives in its defense, we give deepest thanks, O Lord. And in these days of threat, we pray for President Bush, for Secretaries Powell and Rumsfeld, and for all our leaders. Grant them wisdom and strength in the national journey that stretches before us. With your gracious help, O God, may it be a faithful journey toward human freedom and ultimate peace. Comfort those who mourn and those who are homeless and displaced by the violence of war.

God of all nations, bless your people--in whatever land they live, in the best faith they know--to move toward your kingdom where swords are beaten into plowshares, where no one will hurt or destroy, and where war is learned no more. We pray all in the name and the spirits of One called the Prince of Peace, saying together the words he taught us, Our Father.....Amen.